

Gilsonite Industry – Part 2

Tape 62

This is a history trip for senior citizens sponsored by the Uintah County Historical Society of southeastern Uintah County on 19 May 1979. It includes discussion of ghost towns: Dragon, Watson, and Rainbow, and the Gilsonite industry in the early twentieth century.

The group leaders are George Long [George] and Donald Howe [Don]. The tape was made by Mike Brown of the Golden Age Center. The interviewer is Dorothy Robinson.

Transcribed by Janet Taylor, Uintah County Library Regional History Center, April 2001.

BEGINNING OF TAPE #2:

(Several voices are unidentified.)

George: Oh, this is the Virgin. The Black Virgin. Then the Rector, and then the Country Boy and then Dragon.

Don: Now we're going to show these people how cold it was in those days. They should have seen us in there. It was cold even in the summertime.

Unknown: Was that because of the wind?

Don: You could use that for a refrigerator.

Unknown: Wow.

Don: That's what they've done; they've caved that thing all in.

George: Yes, they've filled all these in. I don't know what about further back, but it's pretty narrow.

Unknown: Is the Dragon down this road?

George: You go down this road until you hit the main road again, and you go back to the right to Dragon. Those other mines are back up the canyon, but the roads are so bad up there at the Rector and the Country Boy that the last time I went it took a four-wheel drive to get through. Dragon may be okay.

Unknown: Well, didn't they call this Dragon Canyon?

George: Three Mile. The Three Mile mine is right over the hill. A fellow named Jarvie got killed in there. Don, do you remember that Jarvie got killed over here?

Don: I remember about it, but...

George: Bud Price's dad was the hoist-man when that happened he said.

Don: Now, was that over in the mine just up around the point over that hill here?

George: Yes.

Don: Uh-huh. I remember that time. I'm forgetting everything. I'm sure glad you're here and you can remember.

George: Yes, Bud Price said his dad was the hoist-man and this fellow was supposed to have come out, and he didn't, so he walked down in, and there had been a cave-in on him, you know. Well, we might as well go on to Dragon, then, hadn't we?

Unknown: Here we are at Dragon.

Don: The depot was right across the track here on this side. The railroad depot. The last history meeting we had there, we had a picture of the dock where the Gilsonite was all on fire and everything. That happened right down through here. And, see, the railroad came right along here and off over in there they had stables and things for the teams.

George: Now, where was old Hen Lee's place?

Don: I don't know really.

Mike Brown: He had a saloon here, didn't he?

Don: Well, yes. They had the saloon and the saloon used to sit right over against that hill over there.

Mike Brown: All the way over there?

Don: Yes. See, the road went right up this canyon to the Black Dragon.

Mike Brown: Where did all the buildings go?

Don: Oh, they tore them down many years ago. Sometimes I even came up here from Rainbow to shop at this store up here.

George: The last week's *Vernal Express* told about when they got the two Greek miners out of the Cumberland, up there at Dragon Mine, when it blew up. They had been in there a year and three months. I don't know how well preserved their bodies were. They still had their paychecks. They had gotten paid the night or day before, and the company still had the checks when I worked for them here fifteen or twenty years ago. They had reimbursed their relatives with the pay, and then the old checks, they kept. But those fellows had the checks on them. [They] were back in there working. They were changing shifts and they were coming out, and somehow it blew up. And it encased them in there for a year and three months.

Don: They say that one of them, when they got him out, he still had his pipe in his mouth. They didn't smoke from then on in these mines.

George: And right over the hill from it was the Country Boy mine.

Unknown: Was that why they called it the Black Dragon? On account of the explosion?

George: No, it was named that before they ever . . .

Don: It was a claim name.

George: Yes, the claim name was Black Dragon.

Don: Here's where I was telling you about the road back along here, that goes back towards, back up into it. But you can't hardly tell where it was.

George: No. There were two camps. There was the Dragon Town, and what they called the Dragon Camp. The Dragon Camp started earlier, before they ever built the railroad. When they knew they were going to build a railroad, why, they went to mining, and there were a lot of buildings up there at the camp. A lot of boarded-up tents . . .

Don: Yes, it was a regular mining town up there itself.

George: Yes, there actually were two communities here.

Don: There are still the old cellars there, like there were at Rainbow.

George: Yes. And the cemetery's up there. We'll show you that – or, what's left of it.

Mike Brown: How far up there is it?

George: About a mile.

[Pause]

George: Up in the bar, they kept carrying on, and old Hen Lee had had all he was going to take. But he jumped over the bar, and grabbed him, and he was twice as big as him, but he said old Hen came up with a six-shooter and stuck it right in his face. He said that guy let go of him right quick and old Mr. Banks said, "Don't think Hen wouldn't have pulled that trigger. That feller backed down."

[Pause]

George: Yes, it's had a lot of rock in it. So then they tunneled in, came back this way, and tunneled in. No, before the fire it went straight down in. You can see it when you walk up there. Then when the fire came, they came over this way and ran a tunnel in. They called it "Q" mining. It went back in. No, it wasn't an open cut. They just took that out. Well, I think most of that probably burned.

George: To begin with, there was a camp here called Black Dragon camp. Then when they brought in the railroad, they made the town down there, but the camp stayed. There were two communities here. Two separate communities.

Mike Brown: Oh, did they have homes here and everything?

George: Yes. They were all up and down along here.

Mike Brown: Now, were they here in your lifetime?

George: No. Charley Neal came and ran this about 1940. For about five years. I remember that.

Mike Brown: I wonder, is that some kind of structure over there?

George: Yes, I think that was a boiler or something in there, that they heated water there for the camp. We can walk up there and look down. It goes down there on an incline. Do you feel that cool air coming out and hitting you in the face?

Mike Brown: What, right on top there?

George: Yes. Now, this structure here used to come way out. There was a track that came right along underneath it. It came out beyond those uprights and that timber. And they had a car, and they'd pull the car out and dump it right into the train car. It was called a "tipple."

Mike Brown: I wonder where the tracks went? Did they follow this road?

George: Yes, they came right up the road, and then right down here they forked, and there was

one set that came up here; they'd load the cars on and then they'd run them up. They had a "Y" up here where they'd turn the engines around. They'd bring the engines back down this side, pick up the cars and take them back down.

George: The cemetery. Well, at one time, I think there were about fifteen, but I think now there's only four or five. See, when I came out here to stay in the town, someone had pillaged in the cemetery and dug up a little baby. A little head about the size of your fist. And so we dug back down and put it back in. Just 'a diggin', they broke one headstone, it's there now. I'll take you over there and show you. Broke it right in two. But they dug that little baby's skull up.

Unknown: Where did you say the cemetery is?

George: It's right down here. Just through the fence and on the other side. But, why people will bother with someone when they're laid away that way . . . but they will.

Unknown: But it's really owned by *Standard Oil*?

Don: Yes, and the same outfit that owned this mine owned the A road. There was the Uintah Railroad. I forget now what they called this – probably the Gilson Asphalt Company. Yes, it was. Because the fellow that discovered the Gilsonite was named Gilson, and that's why they named it Gilsonite. That's how they got the name. They owned the mines and they built the railroad to get over here to get this, so they called this Gilson Asphaltum Company and they hid under the Uintah Railroad, but it was all under the same ownership.

Unknown: Well, did they take enough out of here to pay for all this trouble?

Don: Well, they must have done. The railroad paid off. They kept it running until they were flat out of Gilsonite over here. So then they closed up the railroad, but they've still been mining the Gilsonite. And then the railroad cost so much to operate. Then when they got some better roads and better trucks, they could truck it from Bonanza over to Craig cheaper than they could run the railroad. So that's why they did away with the railroad.

Unknown: I guess the railroad had some really tight turns on it, too.

Don: Oh, yes. Some awful tight turns and awful steep and with the first engines they had. They called it the "Thirty" and "Forty." I remember those old engines. The biggest ones they had. After they were dismantled, they wanted to bring it over the mountain here and then reassemble it, because they couldn't get it over the road. They kept one on the other side of the mountain, and worked with it up at the Chief and the Mack, and pick up the cars there and take them down, then the one on this side would gather them up at the mines and take them up to the foot of the mountain, and they had what they called the "Shay" engines. They had sidewinders and gears on the side with cylinders up and down this way instead of like this on the wheels, and turn a shaft, and cog wheels to run on the track. That's what they called the "Shay" engines. I guess you knew

what they were like.

They'd pull the cars over the hill. They could pull two cars over the mountain. And these other engines down here, they'd pull about seven from the mines up to the foot of the mountains. The same way down below. So they'd pull them over the mountain and the other one would take them. And then finally they got those big "Mallets" that would go over that mountain. They'd climb that mountain. They'd make those sharp turns. And, boy, they were big long, engines. You've seen the pictures of them in there. And the big heavy water tanks on the side, to give it the traction, too. They had to put more weight on it to give it more traction. They had the driver trucks separate. One would be turning and another one would come around the turn here underneath the drivers, even. And then behind the cab on the back end here, there was a set of trucks under that little tender thing. And up on the front there was another set of trucks under that cow-catcher. It would come around here. Here came the cow-catcher, then here comes the horn, finally it would come up here and get around the turn. But then they could take them back and...

Unknown: Now, what's this hole over here? Do you know?

Don: No. Rathole, it looks to me like. When we used to work in the oilfield and do assessment work, we could find a hole like that, it would be just fine. We'd come back and put the powder in there, walk up front, set it off, and it would blow out a whole assessment hole, with one shot.

Unknown: It would blow out what kind of hole?

Don: Assessment. In order to file claims on it, then you'd have to do so much work on the claim to keep the claim. So you'd go out there and just dig a hole and you'd have to measure the hole, and maybe take a picture of it, and give them the measurement of it and maybe a picture of it, and everything, to show that you'd done the assessment work.

Unknown: Tell me about it. That's really interesting.

Don: Well, that's just when you're filing on a claim, like when you're homesteading. You'd have to live on that homestead, and one thing and another, and develop it, but any time you left it you'd lose your homestead rights.

Unknown: So you just blow it up just to claim it?

Don: On each claim, each year, they'd have to do that every year, they had to spend \$45 on that claim every year. My father owned some of those claims, and I know he had to spend. We went short of eats sometimes to pay the assessments on that, and then they'd hire a crew of men, and they'd go out, drill a hole down, load it with powder, and blow out a hole in the ground, shovel it all out, and clean it all up nice, so if anyone would come and inspect it, there it was, you had done the work on it. It was just like digging a hole and filling it up, you know, but that would show that you were spending the money and had the interest in it, see. And you do that so many years, and then you can patent it, but you had to go through the law. See, he could tell you more

about that, about getting the patent.

Unknown: Tell me about your father.

Unknown: My father used to do just like he said.

Unknown: Was that for . . .

Unknown: That's why I left the . . .

Unknown: Was your father in mining, or . . .

Unknown: My father was a mining engineer. And my brother had enough credits to graduate from the University of Utah three times, and I didn't know that until after he had died. You knew him, Lorenzo.

Unknown: What kind of mining did your father do?

Unknown: Oh, he was a – I don't know. I don't know much about my father.

Don: Any kind, probably. Mining engineers would.

Unknown: He was one of those who struck a Gilsonite claim out here. Sam Gilson. They named it after Sam Gilson, but my father had a lot of claims out here. He went to school out there. I had two brothers older than I am. About ten or twelve years older. They're both dead. One of them was a certified public accountant, and the other was a mining engineer. He was the one I told you that graduated. I didn't know about that until after he died.

Unknown: Did they come out here before it was opened up over here?

Unknown: I don't know. I think so. I think they came from Strawberry out here. That's all I know. You come from California.

Unknown: Yes, but I'm getting pretty familiar with parts of Utah. Especially between here and Salt Lake.

Unknown: You know where Strawberry is? Well, we had stock there. My father had about a hundred head of horses as well as cattle. He had about six or seven hundred head of cattle. He put his money into... Well, he sold a mine or two, and put his money into cattle.

Unknown: Did he have anything to do with that Strawberry Cattle Company?

Unknown: Well, I don't know what happened there. There are some things I don't know about in

the early days. He got kicked off of Strawberry. And Hatches were cattlemen, too. They had turned into sheep-men. I'm not a sheep man now, . . .

Blevins, up in Colorado, up in Craig, Colorado, I ran stock right next to him. He was a cattleman and I was a sheep-man. I said to him, I said, "Well, if we get along good together it will be fine." And we did, we got along very fine together.

Unknown: Did you run sheep and cattle around here?

Unknown: No. We were on the other side of that mountain. In Brown's Park. Over in Brown's Park. We were on Douglas Mountain.

Unknown: Douglas Mountain.

Unknown: We were on Douglas Mountain, and we had some at Sand Wash country. What they call Sand Wash country.

Don: The Douglas Mountain over here? Or the Douglas Mountain over in Colorado? It's another mountain.

Unknown: Yes, it was in Colorado.

Don: I know, but what I'm talking about is that we have a Douglas Mountain out here in the Book Cliffs, and I'm trying to explain to him, there's another Douglas Mountain over there.

Unknown: Yes, over towards Brown's Park.

Don: I got mixed up on it when I first heard it, too. There's a lot of Sand Washes too.

George: There was no camp at the Country Boy. Like I say, the people would walk right up over the hill. There was road coming in, the first road that we meet going back, turns back to the left, is the Country Boy road. But then the Rector, which is over another couple of canyons, there was a big camp there. And when this here mine burned so bad, why, they opened up the Rector and went to work in it. But then they came back and opened this up after they got the fire out again. But the Rector, I don't know how many homes I've been up in there, I'd imagine there were twenty homes over there.

Don: Is that right? The first school they had down here to Dragon was in tents.

George: According to that article, it was fifteen months later when they got them out. So, I would imagine that that's what they did. Smothered it out. Sealed it off and left it. And worked the other mines, and then came back.

Mike Brown: That stuff's really combustible.

George: Yes, terrible. Now, in that book that Bernice was looking at a while ago, it shows a picture of it pluming out, you know, a real good picture. Where is that? It's down in the car, I guess. You can look at it and just see how it came out just identical to the way it looks there now.

Unknown: Were people living here when it burned?

George: Yes, a lot of people. My dad and mother got married a month later. And they came out and caught the train, stayed over night in a hotel, and her dad and Mr. ? brought them out, and they caught the train, and went to Iowa. They were saying they could see the smoke for miles. Even a month later.

Don: What part of Iowa?

George: Oscalusa.

Unknown: What year was that?

George: They got married in 1908. The mine blew up in February of 1908, and they got married in... .

[Pause]

— Just decided to tell me a story about how all the Indians came through here in Dragon, quite often it was in large groups. The first square dance that he ever went to was here.

END OF TAPE.